

Dear Members and Friends of Elmwood,

I wish I could greet you in person. But the COVID-19 crisis has reached our shores, and it won't allow us to gather. We all respect the reasons why. Still, I want us to keep in touch with each other. The Church is a community, and communities communicate.

What's the Church to do when loving your neighbour means keeping your distance? The tools the Church usually employs – public worship, holy communion, social gathering and teaching – are not at our disposal right now. But we can still reach out to each other with the tools we do have. By phone, email, and cards posted the old-fashioned way, we can share our thoughts and feelings. We can hear each other's worry and loneliness with compassion. We can enquire about each other's well-being and material needs. We can offer tangible help to each other, and to all our neighbours. Isn't this how love, joy, and peace 'go viral'? We must keep hope alive – hope in God and hope in each other.

The Church exists to worship. I have on my bookshelf a little volume, published under the authority of the General Assembly in 1919, entitled "The Book of Family Devotion". It offers prayers, psalms, and scripture readings for every morning and evening of the week. Its authors envisioned households gathering for brief acts of worship. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has always encouraged worship at home, to supplement and sustain our public worship in the sanctuary.

We can't gather to worship in our beautiful sanctuary, but I've prepared some materials you're welcome to use this Sunday. I've attached them to this email. Use them, or not, in a way that suits you best. It may feel awkward and embarrassing, at first, to worship with others at home in this way. We're not used to it. Public worship is public. Shouldn't personal devotions be private? But we ought not to be embarrassed about feeling embarrassed. In time it will feel perfectly natural to worship in this way too. Many of you are already well-practised.

Whenever we bow to pray, or open the Bible to read worshipfully, God is present, and we're united with each other within the body of Christ. In that sense, we're never alone in worship, and it's never a purely private act. We enhance the feeling of taking part in the same act of worship, too, when we know we're all doing it at the same time, at our usual hour of 10:30 a.m. each Sunday. I will be alone in the sanctuary Elmwood at that hour, worshipping with you. That way, God will still be worshipped from Elmwood's sanctuary, and we will still be the Church.

As you worship, you can speak the words aloud, alone or with others; or you can read and pray them silently from within. But you'll find you mean it more when you pray aloud. There is time for silence too.

To compose yourselves for worship, light a candle if you wish. Contemplate the light it casts on the world around you. Don't feel you have to use the whole order of worship. Use as little or as much as feels right to you.

I've attached some comments on the Gospel reading for this Sunday. It's not a sermon – more 'sermon-lite'. Not everyone likes sermons. If that's you, you should feel free not to read it.

As long as this crisis lasts, I'd like to send a pastoral letter to you each week, and offer material for worship at home. If you wish, you can let me know what you think. Share your thoughts about this crisis. Tell me how you're faring. If you don't wish to receive the pastoral letter, you can click "unsubscribe" below.

Elmwood is a strong community of faith. COVID-19 won't change that. We will care for each other. We'll keep hope alive. We'll keep faith and carry on.

The peace of Christ be with you all.

Andrew